

## Saffire Still Shines in a Man's Blues World

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Gaye Adegbalola doesn't want it getting out that if it hadn't been for the departure of her high-school music teacher, "I probably would have gone into classical music." But fortunately for us, Adegbalola withdrew from music when her mentor left, taking science classes instead of playing her flute. Those science courses led her to be a science teacher, and it meant that when she returned to music – to the blues that first captivated her when she was 10 or 11 years old – she was in her 30s.

Adegbalola began taking guitar lessons from Ann Rabson in the late '70s, and they were both solo artists on the Virginia circuit before hooking up in Saffire: The Uppity Blues Women. The band was formed in 1984, and by 1988, burnt out on teaching, Adegbalola was considering making music her full-time job – at age 44.

But she had a tough choice. Her son was entering college, and she had enough money to get him through one year. If things didn't go well with Saffire, she would have to go back to teaching. Plus, she was forsaking steady income for something far less certain. "It was a risk," she said, "because I gave up my benefits." She did it anyway.

"It was really hard initially," she said. The first year was a struggle, but she decided to keep with it. "The following year, we weren't doing any better, but I had faith," she said.

That faith was well-placed. When the band released its self-titled debut record on Alligator Records in 1990, it became one of the Chicago label's best-selling efforts. The band hasn't stopped, crafting upfront acoustic blues driven by piano and full of sassy commentary on being a middle-aged woman. (To get some sense of the tongue-in-cheek humor of Saffire, all you need to do is take a look at some of the album titles: *Hot Flash* and *Broad Casting*, to cite two.)

It seems that Saffire has helped restore women's place in the blues, recalling the days of the blues divas of the 1920s. This is a different animal, though. "I think we've just come full circle," Adegbalola said. The Uppity Blues Women are unique because they not only sing but play their own instruments – with Rabson on piano and vocals, Adegbalola on guitar and vocals, and Andra Faye on multiple instruments and vocals. It might be qualifying things a bit too much, but Saffire is currently the only nationally touring all-female blues band.

"We have a different sound, and a different look, and a different message," Adegbalola said. While the audience of a Saffire show isn't more women than men, it's certainly more feminine than your average blues concert. "We'll have people my age bringing their daughters," Adegbalola said.

One nearly universal reaction is to the band's honesty – not shying away from humor in painful situations, or the pain of everyday life. Adegbalola reports that many people say, "I can't believe these old folks are saying these things."

She labors over the lyrics, which is one reason the band connects so well with a diverse audience. "A lot of times, I'll spend forever on one word," she said. The song "Blues for Sharon Bottoms" was first written in 1994, and it got its fourth and final revision last year for the new

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record *Ain't Gonna Hush!*

Honesty is just one component of the music. The band has done so well, she said, because of its skills. "At the risk of sounding pompous," Adegbalola said, "I guess it's because we're good."

At age 57, Adegbalola has been slowed by health problems, and Saffire's touring schedule has been reduced to six to eight dates per month. But that doesn't mean this middle-aged blueswoman is resting.

In fact, she's been playing clubs with her son, putting her blues background into his industrial and techno music. "I've been playing *goth* clubs!" she said. It's still the blues, she claims, but "it's much more beat-driven and danceable." She plays a solo set first, her son closes the evening, and in between, they share the stage.

Science teacher, founder of a unique all-woman, middle-aged blues band, innovator of a hybrid between blues and industrial/techno music. It might be hard to imagine these things coming from the same woman, but Adegbalola sees common threads. As a science teacher, she performed for high-school kids. "I did a lot of experiments," she said of her teaching days. "It's like doing magic."

The same might be said of her Saffire and moonlighting gigs.